

WORD WALK

Vocabulary Instruction for Young Children

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There is much research to indicate that teaching vocabulary words in the context of storybook reading is worthwhile (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). Indeed, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) collaborated on a joint position statement that suggested reading aloud to children is the single most important activity for building several literacy skills, including vocabulary and language.

Text Talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001) is one instructional technique for building comprehension and vocabulary in the context of storybook reading that has been widely used in elementary settings. The vocabulary component of Text Talk occurs after reading a storybook when the teacher involves children in direct instruction of targeted vocabulary words from the story. Beck and McKeown described a sequence of instructional activities for teaching each word after reading.

First, a teacher using Text Talk reminds students of how the targeted word was used in the storybook and provides a definition of the word. Next, the teacher provides opportunities for students to use the word or to respond to the teacher's example of using the word through discussion. Finally, the teacher asks students to say the word.

Working with teachers, we adapted the components of explicit vocabulary instruction in Text Talk to meet the needs of young children in a two-day sequence we call Word Walk. Word Walk came about as we tried to use the steps of Text Talk with young 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children and noticed that some of the components were too challenging for most

children on the first reading of a storybook. Word Walk differs from Text Talk in three important ways: (1) number of storybook readings focusing on the same words, (2) number of words targeted for instruction, and (3) sequence of when vocabulary instruction occurs during the storybook reading.

Text Talk involves asking children to use or respond to teachers' use of vocabulary words after a storybook reading. Through many observations of storybook reading across multiple classrooms, we found that most preschool children were unsuccessful at coming up with appropriate uses of a new word and responding to teachers' use of a new word after focusing on the word for only one storybook reading.



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As a result, we decided to spread vocabulary instruction over a two-day sequence to allow young children more time to encounter targeted vocabulary words in the same storybook context. We know from research that children need multiple exposures to the same word to be able to understand and use the word in diverse contexts (Beck & McKeown, 2007), and with young children, it made sense to talk about the

same words in the same storybook context to build consistency and familiarity.

In Text Talk, teachers target two to four vocabulary words for direct vocabulary instruction after reading. When using Word Walk to teach vocabulary, we choose one or two words to focus on per two-day reading cycle. We found that any more than two words made the explicit vocabulary sequence too long for most children we observed. Many children were able to grasp and focus on the meanings of two words at a time, and teachers were able to use all the steps of Word Walk with two vocabulary words without greatly extending the length of the overall storybook-reading experience. It was important to us that Word Walk did not take over the storybook reading, requiring too much time and losing young children's attention.

Rather than focus on vocabulary exclusively after reading, Word Walk calls children's attention to specific vocabulary words before, during, and after reading. Reading to young children, we noticed that introducing the word ahead of time helped them listen

for the word during the reading and became a fun game. When we introduced words ahead of time, children became so excited when they heard the words during reading that it became impossible to continue reading without pausing briefly during reading to acknowledge the targeted vocabulary words in the story. Finally, we decided to engage children in vocabulary instruction after reading because they had just heard the targeted vocabulary words in a meaningful context—the storybook.

The Word Walk Method

Figure 1 summarizes the components of Word Walk on the first day of storybook reading. Before reading on the first day of Word Walk, the teacher introduces one or two vocabulary words by showing the written word(s) on a small paper or sentence strip and making the word(s) come to life by showing a picture or prop or acting out the concept (Wasik & Bond, 2001, 2006).

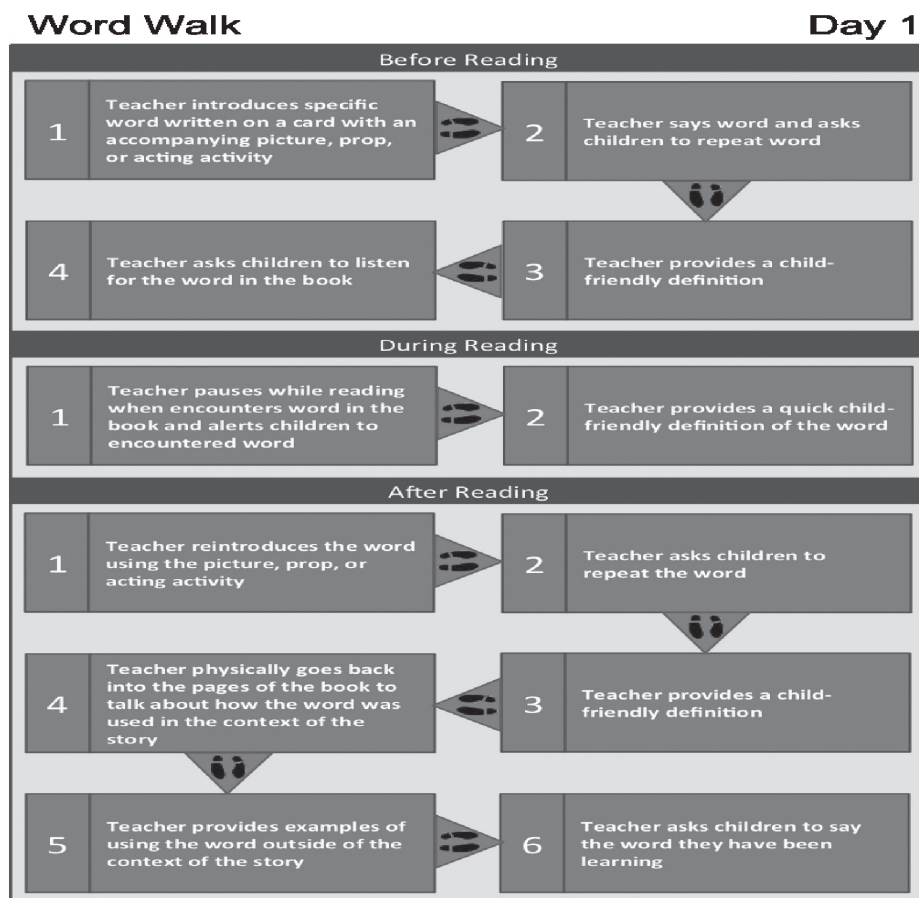
For example, when introducing the vocabulary words *enormous* and *tiny*, a teacher might say: "Today we are going to talk about the words *tiny* and *enormous*. I have two pictures here. One is a picture of a tiny kitten. One is a picture of an enormous elephant." The teacher asks the children to say the words: "Please say the words *tiny* and *enormous*," in order for children to establish a phonological representation of the word (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Next, the teacher provides a brief, child-friendly definition of the word(s) (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002): "*Tiny* means very small, and *enormous* means very big."

We have learned that it is important to provide the definition during the first reading to minimize children taking wild guesses and to streamline

Pause and Ponder

- How are new words currently taught to children in your classroom? Do children own the words by using them in their own conversations?
- What children's books with fantastic words do you have on your shelves? Explore old books to find new words you may have overlooked!
- What kinds of engaging props can you use to introduce new words to children in creative ways?

Figure 1 Word Walk Day 1



the overall time of vocabulary instruction. Finally, before reading, the teacher invites children to listen for the word(s) in the story: "While I am reading the story, listen for the words *tiny* and *enormous*. When you hear the words, raise a quiet hand." Many teachers ask children to raise their hand quietly when they hear the word to alert their teacher without disrupting the reading.

While reading on the first day, the teacher briefly pauses when he or she comes to the word(s) in the text to alert children to the encountered word(s) (Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Robbins & Ehri, 1994). On one

page of the storybook, the teacher may say, "I just heard the word *enormous*; so did some of you because you have raised your hands." At this point during reading, the teacher provides a brief, child-friendly definition of the word(s): "*Enormous* means very big."

After reading, the teacher returns to vocabulary instruction by first reminding children of the word(s) under study by again showing the prop or picture or acting out the concept used before reading. "Remember, today we are talking about the words *tiny* and *enormous*. The elephant is enormous compared to the tiny kitten in this picture." The teacher again asks children to say the word(s) and provides the child-friendly definition: "Please say the word *enormous*. *Enormous* means very big. Please say the word *tiny*. *Tiny* means very small."

To talk about how the word was used in the context of the story (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Snow, 1983), the teacher physically opens the book and returns to the actual page where the word appears in the story to discuss its use. The teacher may say, "Let's go back into the book to see where the word *enormous* is used. Oh, here it is. The dinosaur is enormous."

Next, the teacher provides two or three other contexts for using the word outside the story (Biemiller, 2001; Scott & Nagy, 2004). For example, "Other things can be enormous too. Buildings that reach up into the sky are enormous. Elephants are enormous animals." Finally, the teacher asks the children to say the word(s) one more time, "What words have we been learning? Say *enormous*. Say *tiny*."

Figure 2 summarizes the components of Word Walk on the second day of

"Rather than focus on vocabulary exclusively after reading, Word Walk calls children's attention to specific vocabulary words before, during, and after reading."

TAKE ACTION!

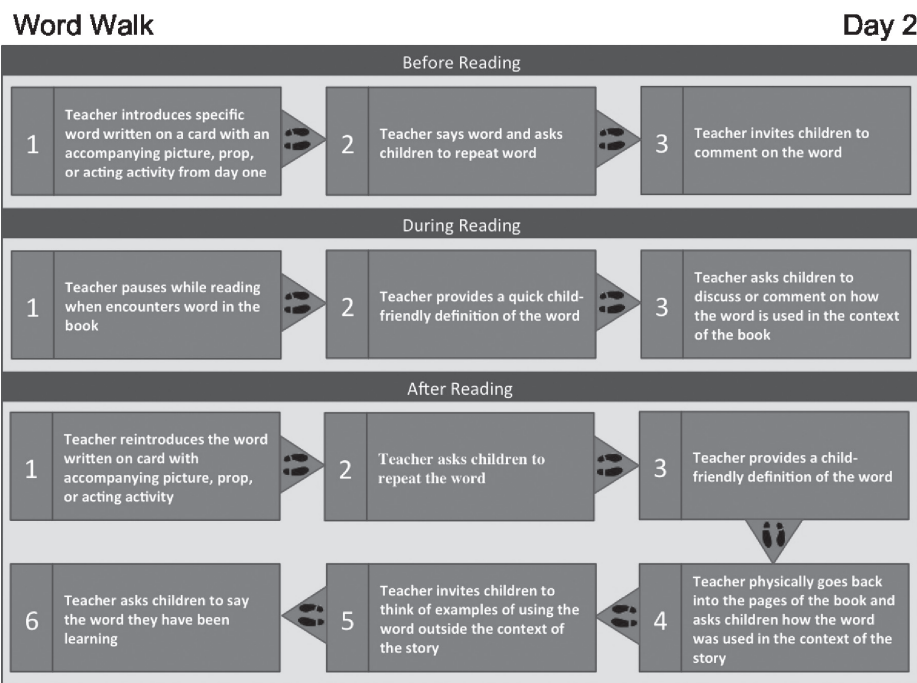
Use the following steps to implement Word Walk in your classroom today:

1. Choose a children's book with rich vocabulary, vivid illustrations, and an interesting story line. In addition, consider whether the book will engage your student audience.
2. Find one or two words from the book to target for vocabulary instruction. Choose words that students will find fun to use!
3. Gather props that you can use to introduce the words. Consider photographs, puppets, or concrete objects that help describe the meanings of the words.
4. Plan your child-friendly definitions of the words. Explain the meanings of the words in ways your students will understand.
5. Review how the words were used in the book.
6. Think of examples of how the words can be used in ways other than how they were used in the book.
7. Reread the sequence to remind yourself of the order of teaching the words before, during, and after reading.
8. Make a plan to revisit the same words during the very next storybook reading.
9. Have fun leading children on a journey of word learning!

storybook reading. On the second day of the Word Walk cycle, the teacher guides children to focus on the same words taught the day before. However, on day 2 of the cycle, the teacher asks children to play a more active role in discussing the words.

Before reading, the teacher reintroduces the words and asks children to say

Figure 2 Word Walk Day 2



the words, just like the first day of the cycle. The teacher may say, "Remember, we are talking about the words *enormous* and *tiny*. The elephant is enormous compared with the kitten in this picture. Please say the word *enormous*. Please say the word *tiny*." In addition, before reading on day 2, the teacher asks the children to comment on the word, maybe remembering something about the word from the day before or making a connection on their own about the word: "What do you know about the words *enormous* and *tiny*?"

During reading, the teacher pauses when reading the words in the text and provides the child-friendly definitions. While reading a page that contains the targeted word *tiny*, the teacher could say, "I just heard the word *tiny*; so did some of you. *Tiny* means very small." During day 2, the teacher also invites children to explain this time how the word is

used in the context of the story while at that part in the book: "What is *tiny* in our book?"

After reading on day 2, the teacher reminds children of the words ("Remember, we are talking about the words *enormous* and *tiny*. The elephant is enormous compared to the tiny kitten in this picture."), asks them to say the words ("Please say the words *enormous* and *tiny*."), and provides the child-friendly definitions ("*Enormous* means very big and *tiny* means very small.").

In addition, the teacher invites children to provide their own examples of using the word outside of the story context (Beck & McKeown, 2001). The teacher could ask, "Can you think of something that is enormous? How about something that is tiny?" This is the step we found young children really struggling with after only one read of the storybook and one exposure to the

word; therefore, Word Walk invites children to construct their own examples only after two days of instruction and exposure to the word. We have found that delaying this component allows young children to be more successful when undertaking it on day 2. Lastly, the teacher asks the children to say the word one final time: "What words have we been learning? Say *enormous*. Say *tiny*."

Classroom Applications

We have used the Word Walk method to teach vocabulary words to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children within the larger storybook-reading context in preschool and prekindergarten settings. We are encouraged when we see children enthusiastically signaling when they hear their teacher read a targeted vocabulary word in a storybook, when we hear children explain how a word is used in the book their teacher is reading to them, and when we hear children come up with creative uses of vocabulary words in new contexts outside of the storybook. We hope that other teachers of young children may find the procedures of Word Walk useful as they plan vocabulary instruction embedded in the context of storybook reading.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "Learning Vocabulary Down By the Bay" by Melissa Weimer

IRA Book

- *Using Children's Literature in Preschool to Develop Comprehension: Understanding and Enjoying Books* (2nd ed.) by Lesley Mandel Morrow, Elizabeth Freitag, and Linda B. Gambrell

IRA Journal Article

- "Missing in Action: Vocabulary Instruction in Pre-K" by Susan B. Neuman and Julie Dwyer, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2009

Even More!

- "Graves on Vocabulary Instruction" (IRA Insights podcast): www.reading.org/General/Publications/Podcasts.aspx

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